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GIOTTO AND MODERN ART*

NOT long ago I was led to the statement that we could not understand modern art unless we understood Giotto—a statement that implied that the modern art movements have their sources in him. As a matter of fact, when we speak of the sources of any art movement, we are not on too solid ground. It is evident that there are powerful underlying forces which influence and shape art forms, but to locate the source of any style in a specific person means only to recognize the artistic criteria of the moment—standards which are as varied and changeable as that much desired quality which we call Beauty.

Not too many years ago contemporary painting boasted free and virile brush strokes. This direct painting, then considered the height of modernism, was shown as the direct descendant of Frans Hals and Velasquez.

The imitative art of the 19th and 20th centuries looked for its sources in the illusionism of the Italian Renaissance and saw Masaccio as the father of modern painting.

Then as subjective expression gradually replaced objective imitation, El Greco was rediscovered as the forefather of modern painting.

With so many paternal ancestors already claimed, let us not fall into the error of putting still another father of modern art in the roots of the family tree.

*This lecture was illustrated by lantern slides. In an attempt to clarify the allusions, the title and author of each illustration are printed in a marginal note at the point in the text that the illustration was used.

Yet there is justification for associating the art of Giotto and his contemporaries with the art of today.

The present day lover of medieval art will probably shudder a bit at the thought that the art styles of the middle ages are closer to modern art than many others, both in appearance and in point of view.

The conceptual basis for art, so much a part of modern expression, dominates both the Byzantine and Romanesque periods.

The common meaning of the term functionalism in relation to the architecture of the present day finds its historic counterpart in the brilliant engineering and planned utility of the Byzantine and Gothic styles.

Again, one of the disturbing aspects of modern art to most laymen is the abstract painting, or simply the abstraction. Many of us will stand before a painting by a Rouault, a Braque or a Picasso with a sense of irritation if not outraged intelligence, yet will look with reverent awe on a 12th century window of colored glass, a sculptured porch of a Romanesque church or the patterned mosaics of some Byzantine interior. Yet what is more abstract than a 12th century window? Where is planned distortion more evident than in the tortured, elongated forms of Romanesque sculpture, or the retreat from imitation more clearly seen than in the Plane Geometry of Byzantine figures?

In the art of Giotto and his contemporaries we find a blending of these qualities to which another is added—Individualism. The result not only makes him representative of his age, but links him strongly to the modern art movements.

This use of the term "modern art" may need some explanation, as common usage tends to confine the term "art" to the art of painting. The term "modern," too, raises some questions. Does it mean a distinctive manner, a peculiar

quality, a certain point of view, or does it mean simply the art of the present day? For our purpose let us use the term "modern" as it is generally used—not only to mean the most recent thing, but also to mean a difference in appearance, character and intent from the art forms to which we have been accustomed.

The term "art" will be used in its broadest sense—to include all of the arts, but also in its more limited sense as painting; for, though Giotto was both sculptor and architect, painting was the means of his greatest contribution.

In reviewing even small portions of the art fields, most writers resort to many generalities. One of these, with which there should be little disagreement, states that the arts are always associated with the life of which they are a part and to which they give expression. This association is not only a matter of reflecting contemporary conditions. There is quite a bit of evidence which shows that the sensitive artist is not only a recorder but a prognosticator.

The artist often anticipates history. We can see now that the conscious attempt of the nineteenth century Impressionist to combine science and art was the first warning of the hurricane of creative effort which has blown across the modern art world and seems to have reached its climax today. At the turn of the century these stormy petrels of art, with accuracy greater than a Gallup poll, were pointing to the scientific fervor which made the atom release its energy, and to the social unrest which led to war.

Yet most of us still cling to the notion that art exists independently, apart from the main current of life.

In making analogies between the past and present of the arts, we are apt to overlook events in other fields which affect the social structure of which art is a part. The modern artist has not arrived at his present viewpoint entirely by conscious

choice. Circumstances of all kinds have directed his attention from the objective world to the subjective. Two examples, among many, are sufficient as illustration. Prior to the invention of printing, the paintings and sculptures were the books of the common man. This gave painting a greater utilitarian function than it now enjoys. Further—the development of photography made it unnecessary for the painter to describe or record, though his selective vision still enables him to do certain things far better than the camera lens. Nevertheless, the painter of yesterday had a more direct function and seemed more integrated to his times.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century the painter seemed gradually to lose the clear and sympathetic understanding of the public, and by the middle of the nineteenth century the thinning ties became open breaks which the cult of “art for art’s sake” widened rather than closed. The painter painted only for himself or the small group which shared his viewpoint. He was his own critic and his own discipline. While today there is some evidence that this complete, almost anarchistic freedom is again seeking external discipline, the modern painter, like modern author and modern composer, continues to comment upon and express in the language of art some bit of experience which to him seems significant in the world of today. He is the judge of what he says and our acceptance of it depends largely upon his power of persuasion and the strength of his statement.

Art and artists today stand with the rest of us on the border of an untried era, labelled by most of us, rightly or wrongly, the Atomic Age. At least twice in the past art has found itself in similar decisive positions. Nearly two thousand years ago, Western culture looked back to the fading outlines of the ancient world and ahead into the unexplored vista of the Christian future. A millennium later the great

ecclesiastical edifice so carefully raised was itself beginning to crack under the impact of what has been called the "intellectual revival," and again the artist found himself, without the protecting authority of an all-wise church, confronting a world of growing intellectual freedom, a world in which old ideas must be given new meaning, a world in which new ideas must be explored and defined.

Into this second world Giotto was born—a world in which the early church was sustained and forwarded by the teachings of St. Francis and St. Dominic, and the logic of St. Thomas Aquinas—an age which saw the beginnings of the modern university, and in which literature was given new direction by the writings of Petrarch, Boccaccio and Dante. We have few exact records of Giotto's life, but these are amplified by so many anecdotes and references given by contemporary and later writers that almost they constitute a legend. This mass of lore, often conflicting and not wholly credible, has given us a reasonably accurate picture of the man whose personal achievements established the course that Western painting was to pursue from his time to our own, with a force still unabated.

The generally accepted data about his life are these. He was born near Florence in the village of Colle in the commune of Vespignano. The date of his birth is under dispute, being set by some in 1276 and others in 1266, the discrepancy being due to the interpretation of Vasari's statement regarding Giotto's age at his death. However, the earlier date is the one generally accepted as it fits more precisely with other facts of his life. According to Vasari, he was a pupil of the Florentine, Cimabue. There seems no reason to doubt this, though the evidence of his work shows that he must have come under the influence, if not the direct teaching of the Roman, Cavallini, or his school, and to have been influenced by the

sculpture of the Pisani, both Nicola and Giovanni, his son.

Although no records remain to prove it, we have reason to believe that he worked on the decoration of the upper church of St. Francis at Assisi sometime during the last ten years of the 13th century, leaving there to go to Rome presumably at the call of Pope Boniface the Eighth to help ready the Eternal City for the first Year of Jubilee. From 1303 through 1305 or 1306 he was at work in Padua on the Scrovegni Chapel, better known as the Arena Chapel, and thereafter is mentioned every so often as active in Florence. In 1327 he is found listed in the Druggists Guild—the “union” open to painters until the formation of their own at a later date. The grinding and mixing of colors allied the painter to the pharmacist whose mortar and pestle would serve equally well to grind cobalt blue or medicinal powders. During this time he must have been made a citizen of the Republic, as Villani speaks of him as “citizen.” From 1329 to 1333 he is in Naples at the court of King Robert of Anjou, where he is listed as “Court Painter.”

In 1334 he is back in Florence and appointed Directing Architect of the new Cathedral, the Campanile of which he is supposed to have designed and which is still called Giotto's Tower. Other documents indicate that sometime during the period following his work in Padua he again visits Rome. This seems likely as he would hardly bypass Rome in going to and from Naples. Records also show that he was active in Assisi, Rimini, Bologna, and Milan. If any further evidence of his widespread fame is needed, it may be found in the just praise of his work by Dante.

One of the few exact dates of his career known to us is that of his death, which occurred on January 8, 1337, and he was buried with all honors in the Cathedral upon which he was working.

We know him as Giotto, but his official name is Giotto di Bondone—from his father's name, but even this seems to have been shortened from his given name, probably Ambrogiotto, literally "little Ambrose."

To further our picture of him, we must turn to the references and anecdotes. While Dante's praise supports his fame as an artist, Boccaccio shows him as a man of Florence by making him a principal of several Decameron tales. Sacchetti, Villani, Ghiberti, and Vasari tell and repeat anecdotes which not only show him as a "hail fellow, well met" but as a man of wit and wisdom, a humanist whose thought was as sound, as independent and progressive as his art.

There is the story of the pig told by Sacchetti. It seems that Giotto dressed in his Sunday best was knocked down by a pig which had run between his legs. On picking himself up and dusting his clothes, he said, "The pig was quite right to knock me down. I have made lots of money by using pig bristles but have never returned to the pigs as much as a bowl of soup."

But the tale best known about Giotto concerns the emissary from the Pope, who asked Giotto for a sample of his work to support his qualifications for a commission, only to have Giotto take a paint brush and with one quick sweep of his arm paint an almost perfect circle. This was all that he would send to the Pope, but it proved to be enough, and the "O of Giotto" became a household word. Together with this story is the one concerning his discovery by Cimabue. This story related by Ghiberti and repeated by Vasari is given certain validity by the supposition that Giotto's father, Bondone, was a farmer. It seems that when Giotto was about ten years of age, his father set him to watching a flock of sheep. As he wandered about the pasture, he was constantly drawing on bits of slate, the sheep and other objects he observed. It so happened that one day the painter Cimabue

passed by and was struck by the natural ability to draw shown by the youth. Cimabue then induced Giotto's father to permit the boy to go to Florence and enter his workshop to begin his formal art education. This story is discounted by some sources who claim Giotto's father was a blacksmith in Florence, but whether both these tales are true or are in the nature of Parson Weems' story of George Washington and the cherry tree, they both point to the love of the Renaissance for technical skill and realistic imitation of nature.

It was not without cause that it was said of Giotto: "There is nothing in nature that he cannot imitate so well as to deceive our very senses making them imagine that his painting was the thing itself."¹ Now no one today would agree with that statement. Giotto's works do not imitate nature so as to deceive our senses. We may realize his representations more quickly and completely than the things themselves, but that is a different matter from deceiving our senses with imitation.

The statement only shows that the term realism, or naturalism, is relative and by no means exact. There is no doubt that the people of Giotto's day who knew little but Byzantine flatness saw in the apparent solidity and thickness of Giotto's figures a quality that seemed to be more real than life itself. It is highly debatable to suppose that Giotto intended that his paintings, to the best of his ability, be deceiving imitations of natural forms; however, the fact remains that from Giotto's time to our own the Western world has been preoccupied with imitation.

Mona Lisa
Leonardo da Vinci
Louvre, Paris

The representation of a temporary visual image has been a major goal. Leonardo is revered for his ability for naturalistic imitation, and lends his support by declaring that the primary purpose of painting is to create the sense of three dimensions where there are but two.

This interest in the representation of some part of the natural world has caused the present confusion of the artistry of imitation with the art of concept—to overstate the importance of the perceptual in relation to the conceptual—to seek simple observation instead of creative imagination. I, for one, have no quarrel with an art of perception. Art after all is but some bit of human experience given visible or audible form. The artist has always turned to the world of the senses for forms to express the world of ideas. But when we allow the imitation of transitory appearances to become the end rather than a means of expression, we confuse art values. No great intelligence is required to represent adequately some phase of the world of appearances. The technical dexterity may be acquired easily or by perseverance. The observation necessary need never pierce the outer surfaces, need never see or try to see the meanings beyond the observed phenomena.

Dignity and Impudence
Sir Edwin Landseer
National Gallery,
London

Aside from this, our seeing is subject to change. What yesterday seemed a sincere and realistic portrayal of life, today seems ludicrous in its artificiality. How many of us can look today at any motion picture taken three decades ago without the tendency to laugh. That which once was the height of dramatic reality now seems only affectation or burlesque.

Hope
George Frederick
Watts
Tate Gallery, London

Then, what we most often call naturalism, this imitation of appearances, if made the end of painting, has validity only so long as our way of seeing things remains unchanged. To have lasting value, naturalism or imitation must always be subordinate to the organization of the picture as the expression of idea or the interpretation of experience.

Mont Saint Victoire
Paul Cezanne
Phillips Memorial
Gallery
Washington, D.C.

It is this subordination of the purely imitative, even in times when this factor is most greatly desired, that unites all great works of art. But by subordination we do not mean complete suppression, nor total abandonment. Art may at

Variations on

Rhythm H

Raymond Jonson

Museum of Fine

Arts of Houston

times desert the visible world completely and produce an organization of forms and colors filled with meaning akin to the spiritual exaltation of great music or the clear-cut truth of the mathematical formula. But to insist that the visible world should be abandoned, always, and the abstract basis of all art be the goal instead of the framework is to trade one evil for another.

The art that makes imitation take precedent over ideas is no worse nor better than the abstraction which becomes so subjective as to lose all relation to life—where the skeleton is

Still Life (Cubist
Period)

Pablo Picasso

Private Collection

confused with the body—the technical exercise with a finished composition. It is a matter of placing emphasis rather than the complete acceptance of either imitation or abstraction.

Today, the world of art is filled with paintings that have gone far from the world of appearances—perhaps as a reaction

Still Life with

Guitar

Georges Braque

tion to the romantic naturalism of the nineteenth century or perhaps in an effort to find forms to express the age of the machine.

No matter what the cause, the abstraction by its very nature emphasizes the art of idea, the art of concept. In the art of

Earth Rhythms

Ruth Pershing Uhler

Museum of Fine

Arts of Houston

concept the attention of the spectator is directed constantly within the frame to the picture itself. The forms within the picture count as meaning rather than alluding to external objects from which the forms derive. The things that count are the intrinsic qualities of the picture itself as a

means of communicating ideas. In the art of imitation the attention of the spectator is directed outside the picture to the objects which have been imitated. The more skillful the imitation, the more readily do we desert the picture for the real world. Advertisers have used this fact successfully for many years, and it is a basic factor in illustration. The picture becomes valuable only as it creates interest in the thing illustrated.

Shoeing the Bay Mare
Sir Edwin Landseer
Tate Gallery, London

For many years Giotto was praised chiefly for his power as an illustrator. Such praise was well deserved, for Giotto was a master story teller; but to consider him for this quality alone would be to understate his significance.

When the works of Giotto are first compared to those of his contemporaries, the more natural, the more life-like, the more imitative qualities of his work are immediately observed. We are prone to admire him for these qualities which are more in line with our own tastes and artistic background. We excuse what to us seem crudities of naturalistic drawing on the premise that certain factual knowledge was not at Giotto's disposal and that skill in drawing naturally had, at that time, yet to be acquired. This immediately raises the question of just what do we mean by good drawing? This opens an avenue too long to be travelled at present except for the dogmatic statement that the exact drawing of observed details is often good recording but seldom good drawing. Giotto is referred to as a "Primitive" as if to place him in the same category as such untutored modern primitives as Rousseau and Pippin. There is no doubt that the crude though vigorous and imaginative work of the self-taught artist has a sound esthetic basis to account for the tremendous vogue it enjoys in the art pattern

The Visitation
Giotto
Arena Chapel, Padua (All illustrations of the work of Giotto are taken from the Arena Chapel at Padua).

The Cascade
Henri Rousseau
The Art Institute of Chicago

of today; but to put the designs of Giotto into the class of the self-taught primitive, or to see the deformation of his painted figures and buildings as the result of ignorance of visual fact is to underestimate or misunderstand the art of the period of which he was a part.

The Rucellai Madonna
Duccio da Siena
Santa Maria Novella,
Florence

Giotto was born into an art world whose language of forms was old, matured by a thousand years of tradition—art forms in which technical skill was of greatest importance—art forms which served primarily one function, that of expounding the dogmas of the medieval church. To be sure there existed beside them a lay art, not so much subject to the demands imposed by the church, which played an important part in preserving the artist's freedom of thought and action. But it was neither of the quantity nor importance of the official church art.

Each apprentice artist had to complete many years of exacting technical study in order to render satisfactorily an iconography so thoroughly established and so resistant to change.

It was not an age for the untaught amateur. The age which saw Duccio and Simone Martini of Siena, with their studied mannerisms and sophisticated style, was not an age for the naive or primitive. Rather it was an age in which the old conceptual forms of Byzantine painting had been carried to their limit to hold the new ideas which were pouring into them.

San Ansano Annunciation
Simone Martini
Uffizi, Florence

Simone makes the final statement in 1333 when he finishes the San Ansano Annunciation. Painted after Giotto's chief works were finished, it shows the power of pure line and pattern, rather than the representation of nature, to evoke the emotional depth of this Christian mystery. The selection of shapes, colors and lines, the exquisite study of

each detail in which nothing is left to accident, and in which representation is completely subordinated to design, tells of an art mature and tried, neither youthful nor experimental.

*Angel from Last
Judgment*
Giotto

In contrast, the work of Giotto of Florence seems to show a strong consciousness of the objective world and an attempt to represent with it forms suggesting three dimensions. He appears as a revolutionary breaking with the set of conventions of medieval art and creating new forms based on reality.

But Giotto is by no means the first painter since the decay of classic art to suggest in his paintings, by means of light and shade, solid three dimensional form. Cavallini of Rome anticipates Giotto by ten years in his frescos in St. Cecilia at Rome, as does the unknown painter of the story of Isaac in the upper church of St. Francis at Assisi. Moreover, this unknown master, some years before Giotto, has given his figures a sense of movement or action which, though inaccurate in detail, is both compelling and realistically satisfying.

*Saint from Last
Judgment*
Pietro Cavallini
Santa Cecilia, Rome

Sacrifice of Isaac
Master of the Isaac
Legend
Upper church of St.
Francis, Assisi

Artists had gone a long way in their exploration of form before Giotto appeared. He was no revolutionary in this sense, yet if we are to believe the evidence seen in the works of his followers it was his ability to depict realistically that won their admiration and proved their downfall. For three generations after Giotto's death, painters imitated his methods and produced greater realism but far less significance.

*Marriage of the Vir-
gin*
Taddeo Gaddi
Baroncelli Chapel
Santa Croce, Flor-
ence

Taddeo Gaddi, one of Giotto's followers, frankly stated that since Giotto's time the art of painting had steadily

grown weaker. Painters laid the decline to their inability to match Giotto's skill. In this they may have been right, but their major fault lay in seeing Giotto's genius only in his skill to create a sense of reality, to imitate objects in the visible world.

The medieval artist who preceded Giotto was prevented from elaborating upon the object which he was representing, and in consequence fixed his attention upon the picture itself. Any reference to concrete objects employed in making this picture is secondary to the organization of the picture in order that it may function as idea.

*Founding of Santa
Maria Maggiore*
Filippo Rusuti
Right center—old
façade
Santa Maria Mag-
giore, Rome

When Filippo Rusuti tells in mosaic the legend of the founding of Santa Maria Maggiore, cherubs bring the snow as if in a blanket, and allow it to fall on a row of green and mature vegetation, for it was August the fifth in Rome. The Pope, whose figure is solid enough, plots the plan of the church in the snow—though, if the church were built at that size, the Pope, let alone the young patron, could not get into it.

In all cases it is an ideograph rather than a picture—a series of forms expressing the idea of snow, the idea of growing plants, the idea of the church rather than the imitation of the reality.

Bewailing of Christ
Giotto

Giotto accepts this point of view and never abandons it. His ability to imitate reality is always secondary to his ability to reform and re-express the traditional elements in medieval painting in the light of the most progressive thought of his times. Instead of a primitive attempt to imitate the objective world, Giotto's simplified forms should be seen as abstractions—simplifications to eliminate irrelevant material and concentrate the attention on the meaning that Giotto neces-

sarily was giving to traditional pictures. It was this necessity that led Giotto to develop a new vocabulary of forms which would be adequate to express a world of changing ideas and to introduce new meaning in the pictorial telling of the Sacred Legend.

There is no better place to see this than in the series of frescos of the Arena Chapel. It miraculously escaped all war damage, though a few hundred yards away the Mantegna frescos in side chapels of the Eremitani Church were blown out of existence.

General view toward
altar
Arena Chapel, Padua

In 1303 or thereabouts Enrico Scrovegni of Padua commissioned Giotto to decorate with fresco his recently completed chapel—then a wing of the Scrovegni Palace. The palace and chapel were built upon the ruins of an arena, a relic of the Roman town. It is this arena that gives the chapel its common name, the palace having been destroyed in the early nineteenth century.

Enrico was the son of a wealthy money-lender, Reginaldo Scrovegni, who was unceremoniously put into hell with other usurers by Dante. It is thought, not without foundation, that the chapel which he dedicated to the Virgin was Enrico's effort to alleviate, in a measure, the highly uncomfortable position of his paternal ancestor. Enrico, at the same time, commissioned Giovanni Pisano to carve a marble figure of the Virgin and Child for the high altar. There is every reason to believe that Pisano and Giotto knew each other personally, and together exchanged ideas with that other friend of Giotto—Dante, who was in the Po Valley at that time, though definite record does not place him in Padua until 1306, but less than a year after the dedication of the chapel.

Last Judgment
Giotto
Entrance (west) wall

Madonna and Child
Giovanni Pisano
High altar, Arena
Chapel, Padua

General view toward
entrance
Arena Chapel, Padua

The Arena Chapel is relatively small, a single nave with no side aisles, about ninety feet long, less than thirty feet wide and covered with a simple barrel vault whose crown is about forty feet above the floor. The nave is lighted mainly by six narrow windows on the south side though light is also received from the small triple window on the west and the narrow lancets of the choir.

The Giotto frescos are on the four walls of this nave, those of the choir being later additions by pupils. The frescos have been called Giotto's greatest work, representing his mature style. They have suffered very little at the hands of the restorer, and their authenticity is beyond dispute. In the past, they have been seen as a series of separate panels unified only by color, shape, and the continuity of the subjects.

For example, the late Roger Fry in his book *Vision and Design* stated that the total design was made up of the sum of a number of separate compositions.² Wilhelm Suida, while going a bit further, still claims that the series should be viewed in "temporal succession."³ Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., in his discussion of the Arena Chapel,⁴ first calls attention to the color and iconographical unity, and then devotes his attention to the nature and method of Giotto's painting with its unquestioned powerful impact upon the spectator. But at the

*Marriage of the
Virgin*
Giotto

close of this analysis he makes a statement in line with today's study, "The cave man would have understood Giotto and so would the post-impressionist of today."

But Giotto may be linked even more closely to the modern point of view. This link is indicated in the findings of Michele Alpatoff in an article written in Moscow.⁵ He calls attention to a most interesting parallelism in the Paduan frescos. This parallelism may have been noted by others, but,

in so far as I know, Alpatoff is the first to develop and point out its significance which, when recognized, should change, measurably, our appraisal of Giotto's genius. Giotto emerges as an innovator, not only in the field of realism, but in that of concept.

If records are correct, Giotto's work in the Arena Chapel may have been finished in less than three years and certainly not more than four. The dedication date of March 25, 1305, does not indicate that the frescos were complete at that time, but most authorities agree that no work was done by Giotto after 1306. This relatively short time does not help us to establish the order in which the frescos were painted by stylistic changes, but as the south wall with its windows presented the most arbitrary space arrangement we may assume that it helped form Giotto's decorative scheme even if it was not the starting place of the work.

The walls of the chapel are divided into three horizontal bands of paintings, except for the entrance wall which is completely covered with one painting, *The Last Judgment*. The uppermost band is made of thirteen scenes from the life of the Virgin—*The Annunciation*, divided by the choir arch, counting as one. The two lower bands show the life of Christ with the single exception of the *Visitation*—Mary to Elizabeth—on the right side of the choir arch. The windows of the south wall divide the lower bands into five divisions, each one of which could accommodate two frescos, one above the other, or ten in all. By keeping the same size for each panel, the lower bands on the north wall were decorated with twelve frescos. The top band, dealing with the life of Mary, was thought of as a unit. The number of its frescos did not correspond to those of the lower bands; so it was not coördinated with them except by color and pattern. While a great many of the pic-

Annunciation
Giotto

tures of the life of Christ correspond to traditional iconography, both in details and in historical sequence, Giotto does not seem to have been bound by traditional rules. Rather, he seems to have been given the liberty, or to have taken the liberty, of making his own selection of subjects from the large

Flight to Egypt
Giotto

number of themes at his command, and of arranging them in accordance with his ideas of how the pictures should be read to best express their inherent human and moral values. This emphasis upon meaning, rather than illustration, is a characteristic common to modern painting. It is to be noted that Giotto emphasizes Christ's Childhood and Early Ministry together with the Passion, at the expense of intervening events. Moreover, in the Paduan series we do not find the popular subjects such as the Temptation, the Transfiguration, the Prayer in Gethsemane or the Descent from the Cross.

Last Supper
Giotto

Let us consider a few of the vertical groupings chosen from both walls of the Chapel in the light of Alpatoff's observations. Looking at these superimposed designs, one is led to the belief that Giotto chose subjects in order to form a concordance with the events of Christ's Childhood and those of his Passion.

The first group on the south wall shows the Last Supper underneath the Nativity.

The Last Supper opens the story of the Passion.

Nativity
Giotto

The Nativity opens the story of Christ's Childhood.

Both allude to the Mystery of Incarnation, but Giotto attempted to create a visual resemblance between the scenes as well. He uses the shed of Early Christian iconography as the setting for the Nativity thus forming a better correspondence with the open room of the Last Supper. He also places the Virgin of the Nativity and the

Christ of the Last Supper on the left of the composition and stresses the love for Jesus first of the Virgin and then of John. In doing this he abandons the Byzantine tradition followed by Cavallini.

Again compare the *Adoration of the Wise Men* and *Christ Washing the Disciples' Feet*. The Magi kneeling before the baby, the teacher kneeling before his pupils, and the one little thing significant to the new humanism of Giotto's time, a homely or genre motif to the left of each fresco. In the Adoration, a servant holds the halter of a camel. In the Washing of the Feet, a disciple fastens his sandal.

In the next pair, Giotto abandons historical and traditional sequence. He places the Presentation at the Temple next to the Adoration of the Wise Men and before the Flight to Egypt. Underneath he places the Betrayal, omitting the Prayer in the Garden. Both the Presentation and the Betrayal represented related events, one early, one late in Christ's life. Both foretell the future. In the first, Simeon prophesies Christ's great future; in the second, Judas' action forewarns us of his death.

On the north wall, three other groups show a correspondence, perhaps more easily seen. The relation between the Baptism and the Crucifixion is obvious even without recognizing that the water of Jordan was considered a prototype of the blood shed on Golgotha.

Nativity
Pietro Cavallini
Santa Maria in
Trastevere, Rome

Adoration of Magi
Giotto

*Washing of Disciples'
Feet*
Giotto

*Presentation of Christ
in Temple*
Giotto

Betrayal of Christ
Giotto

Baptism of Christ
Giotto

The Crucifixion
Giotto

Bewailing of Christ
Giotto

Marriage at Cana
Giotto

Raising of Lazarus
Giotto

The Resurrection
Giotto

Instead of the Descent from the Cross, the Bewailing of Christ is placed under the Marriage of Cana. Both show Christ in the midst of his nearest friends. In one, he is the source of their sorrow; in the other, he is the source of their joy.

In the Raising of Lazarus placed over the Resurrection, we have two events in which Christ is the conqueror of death—the first, his friend's; the second, his own.

As we look at the correspondence between these various themes, we are at once confronted by the question of just how much of this can be attributed to pure chance. Was any of it intentional? The simplest answer can be given by disturbing Giotto's order in favor of historical or iconographical sequence. If the positions of the Presentation in the Temple and the Flight to Egypt are reversed, placing them in historical relation, the whole correspondence breaks down. While this is not proof of intention, surely it is a strong indication of it.

Now this idea of concordance is not new. The medieval church continually strove to show the relation between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfillment. Giotto followed a traditional method by pairing events, but the events of Christ's childhood which he selected are not those which best foretell Christ's Passion. It was the internal similarity between two periods of Christ's life that Giotto emphasized; and for this he had no established forms.

Expulsion of Joachim
Giotto

He had to find his own iconographical solution. In this he was as much an innovator as he was with his simplified

yet solid realistic forms.

Again, see how Giotto uses these forms, with all of their

sense of solid mass, solely to suggest idea. His painted buildings, though real in each detail, do not imitate actual buildings nor have they the proper scale of buildings. They suggest buildings—buildings people have seen with architectural details they know. Notice that our two scenes involve the temple and in both the baldacchino and pulpit are used with almost identical forms. These things meant church or temple to the Italian people.

*Presentation of the
Virgin*
Giotto

These were the means at his disposal to give a new meaning to traditional pictures; to show the human significance of the Sacred Legend; to give 14th century meaning to 14th century forms. This is what binds him to the art of our times, which faces similar problems. To us our problems seem more complex, but it is doubtful that our modern age is any more formidable to us than was that other modern age—six hundred years ago—to the people of that time.

Parallelism is still a means of emphasizing meaning and is used extensively by muralists today. Witness Rivera in his well-known frescos in the Ministry of Education in Mexico City. Labor and Capital are shown in contrasting roles not too complimentary to the latter, and, whether we agree or not with the opinion expressed, the meaning surely is not clouded.

The Billionaires
Diego Rivera
Ministry of Education, Mexico City
Harvest of Fruit and Knowledge
Diego Rivera
Ministry of Education, Mexico City
Departure of Quetzalcoatl
Jose Clemente Orozco

And Orozco, in painting his great commentary on the cultures of the western world for the library at Dartmouth College, shows the departure of the benign Quetzalcoatl in comparison to the assumed migration of the Christian Spirit, due to modern men's abuse of divine gifts.

Library, Dartmouth College.
(All illustrations of the work of Orozco are taken from the Library at Dartmouth College.)
Modern Migration of the Spirit
Jose Clemente Orozco

Pre-Columbian Man
Jose Clemente Orozco

Modern Industrial Man
Jose Clemente Orozco

Anglo America
Jose Clemente Orozco

Hispano America
Jose Clemente Orozco

Public Lectures

The Pre-Columbian workers contrast with the modern industrial age in forms simplified for greater power.

And finally, Anglo-American rule by town meeting and education is contrasted with Spanish-American rule by revolution.

Note that in choice and interpretation of subject neither Orozco nor Giotto are concerned whether the subject be a pleasant one or not. The motive is chosen for its significance to our lives, and the use to which it can be put by the artist to explain and declare his belief and his opinions.

Both Giotto and Orozco are not merely interpreting events, they are putting experience into visible form. They are writing by means of their painting their thoughts of the two worlds in which they live. We may accept their statements or reject them as we do a book, but what we do has little bearing on their accomplishment. This is so different from the simple skill necessary to imitate in paint the things we see.

Meeting of Joachim and Anna
Giotto

Both Orozco and Giotto are similar visually. Both use simplification and abstraction in order to express idea; both try to find new forms to hold new meanings. Giotto's choice of forms seems like Dante's choice of language. In an age where the old political and religious authority was giving way to the new intellectual freedom, medieval Latin gave way to Tuscan Italian and Byzantine pattern gave way to Renaissance form.

In Giotto's works we have fulfillment and prophecy. The religious thought of the middle ages is given its final and most complete statement and the new era of humanism is clearly indicated.

It is easy to see how Giotto can be at once the last great exponent of medieval painting and the first great individual

of the Renaissance. Whether or not this can be said of Orozco in relation to modern times remains for a future day to decide, but art today stands in a similar position.

If to us the machine age and the industrial revolution have yet to be given the visual expression that Giotto gave to the humanism and rationalism of St. Francis and St. Thomas Aquinas, it may be that we do not care to see, nor care to admit, that the complexity and the "isms" which abound in modern art truly reflect our cherished culture, or forewarn us of the time when man may become the slave of his genius rather than the master of it.

City Interior
Charles Sheeler
Private Collection

The Tenement
George Biddle
Department of Justice
Washington, D.C.

Not long ago, someone wrote a book titled "Why We Behave Like Human Beings." I think the title sums up things that may be wrong with our world. Until we stop behaving like human beings and behave more like the Children of God,⁶ we can anticipate rough waters ahead.

The Machine
Jose Clemente Orozco

And what has this to do with Giotto and modern art? Only this—the creative artist is the barometer, not of local conditions, but of those strong underlying pressures that slowly but surely shape the social, the cultural structure. In the work of Giotto lies the whole of the 14th century. Would you like to know better the nature of the 20th century? Then look to its artists.

JAMES CHILLMAN, JR.

NOTES

¹Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Sixth Day, Fifth Tale.

²Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, London, 1929.

³W. Suida, *Giotto's Stil*, Bonn, 1926.

⁴F. J. Mather, Jr., *History of Italian Painting*, London, 1923.

⁵M. Alpatoff, "The Parallelism of Giotto's Paduan Frescos," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (September, 1947).

⁶Matthew 5:9